

## reviews

**Peter Kivy.** *New Essays on Musical Understanding.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. x, 236 pp.

**Lawrence Kramer.** *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. ix, 335 pp.

*Reviewed by Lydia Goehr*

It is not obvious that one would choose to read these two new essay collections together, although their titles are similar. But it is useful to do so. Both are notable for their author's display of wit, musicianship, and deep commitment to writing seriously about music. Both show the current interests of the field. Yet, radically opposed in method and style, each serves to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of the other. Both are offered as unapologetic demonstrations of their methods. Peter Kivy is one of the most significant figures in the field of the analytic philosophy of music; Lawrence Kramer is a major contributor to the postmodern discourse of New Musicology. Kivy is a self-proclaimed purist about music; Kramer wants to account also for music's being socially conditioned. Kivy's brevity, clarity, and use of explicit argument contrast with Kramer's length, indirection, and sometimes obscure style; Kramer's richness and hermeneutical complexity contrast with Kivy's sometimes historically-spare account. Both, however, share a certain modesty, because, whereas Kivy seems not to want to assert that there is anything too new in his *New Essays*, so Kramer seems content to move only "toward" a *Critical History*.

What is "new," Kivy tells us, is, first, that most of his essays haven't been published before and, second, if they have, then at least that this book constitutes a new collection of his essays written since 1993. These are the features Kivy uses to bind his "self-contained," "diverse," and mutually "inconsistent" essays together, even if, as he adds, they all contribute to his own overall "coherent" philosophy of music. But a worked out philosophy of music is less what he gives us than a collection of exploratory and revisionary essays on topics about which he says he still has not finally made up his mind. The section titles he uses to divide the eleven essays similarly do

little to produce a whole that is more than the sum of its parts: "Some History (and its Aftermath)"; "Music and the Emotions (Yet Again)"; and "More about Music." These titles in turn reflect the strikingly self-effacing quality of the essays themselves: strong conclusions withdrawn and modified, or asides and qualifications offered in the spirit of this book's being part of an ongoing project or discussion with others in the field. Of course, one wouldn't expect Kivy's tentativeness to entirely mask his more usual sharp and sometimes even angry arguments against his opponents—it doesn't. But in this collection, unlike in the many other books he has written, the atmosphere of tentativeness pervades.

However, despite his own disclaimers, Kivy does treat both usual and unusual topics in the philosophy of music with often novel and smart arguments. Essay 1 describes the role of early (medieval) notation in shaping the work-concept (about which I'll say more in a moment); essay 2 treats Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of music, interestingly read as looking back to former, eighteenth-century representational theories of music's meaning and forward to romantic theories of music's liberational powers. His third essay looks at the apparent inconsistency between Eduard Hanslick's formalist aesthetic theory and his anti-formalist music criticism. The fourth offers a clever, though unsympathetic, explanation of why the languages of serialism and minimalism are (apparently) too difficult or banal for listeners to listen to: serialism, he argues, (unsuccessfully) "challenged" music's linguistic code and minimalism (unsuccessfully) "broke" music's "prescriptive code." Part 2 offers revisions and extensions of Kivy's deservedly well-known work on musical emotion and expression (e.g., 1989). Part 3 comprises an uncharitable attack on "New musicology"; a dismissive essay on music and political or social movements; a positive response to Jerrold Levinson's *Music in the Moment* (1997), with its account of architectonic listening; and a modest proposal, contra Nelson Goodman (1968), defending the ontological possibility of forging a musical work.

Most of Kramer's essays are also new (9 of the 12), yet in his words they continue a project already largely worked out. Still, this project does move toward a more interesting sense of the "new"—the "new" of "New Musicology"—a "critical" project based on retheorizing practice with the aim to replace "old" or atrophied methods and discourses. In his *Music as Cultural Practice* (1990), he says that he employed the notion of "symbolization" to demonstrate how music did not need to be translated into, because it already was, a well-formed communicative discourse. In *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (1995), he investigated how classical musical forms "condensed" narrative and depictive forms of subjectivity. In this collection, Kramer focuses on "ambiguity," specifically, the lack of strict determination of musical meaning, to show how music can situate itself

and be situated in all kinds of ways in our world of concrete human affairs. It is most closely an existential notion of "ambiguity," in which musical meaning is constituted (both as autonomous and as socially determined) through the many roles and modes of expression music comes to assume.

Kramer maintains that a thick description of music's situatedness will make explicit (or bring to voice) aspects of musical practice that have been repressed by dominant discourse(s). For this reason, he claims that his writing contains a politics. However, it's a politics positioned entirely at the level of discourse and retheorizing. So positioned, the question arises as to whether such a description of music's place in the world, as a mirror of the self's place, suffices to meet the implied critical demand for the renegotiation of that place. Describing how musical forms mirror and mediate modes of subjectivity is one thing. Whether it suffices to sustain a politics of the new, or to account adequately for the dynamics of social change, is another. What one might ask for here is less a devotion to discourse per se than a devoted account of social practice. Another critical question arises whether such retheorizing can avoid becoming, in its own political certitude, just a substitute of that which it seeks to replace. *New Musicology*, like any other method, can become old very fast. No method is immune.

Kramer's approach is hermeneutic and existential, descriptive and interpretative, literary, musical, and philosophical. His figures include Schubert, Schumann, Shakespeare, and Shostakovich; George Eliot, Brecht, Coltrane, and the Marx Brothers. His concepts include identity, subjectivity, gender, autonomy, alienation, mourning, and memory. He treats high and low art and entertainment, unified and fragmented identity, aesthetic transcendence and social determination. However, it is almost impossible to state the conclusion of any one of Kramer's essays without making it look as if one has reduced his entire argument to a platitude. For he offers less linear arguments than juxtapositions of increasingly fragmented paragraphs, dealing with many different kinds of material, which he splices together in a most impressive manner. Unfortunately, I have to add that the manner, especially of quotation, is sometimes also rather overwhelming, making it difficult for the reader to grasp the pattern. Still, suffice it to recommend his fourth essay, "Franz Liszt and the Virtuoso Public Sphere: Sight and Sound in the Rise of Mass Entertainment," and his tenth essay, "Long Ride in a Slow Machine: The Alienation Effect from Weill to Shostakovich," with the proviso that this recommendation largely reflects my own interests. I think it fair to say that, in Kramer's book, there is something for everyone.

Yet one can identify an overriding methodological aim to overcome much of the rigidly dichotomous nature of traditional (Romantic/Modern) musical discourse by reconsidering concepts, say, of the musical,

extramusical, form, and expression. With this aim, Kivy might have some sympathy. But whereas Kramer aims to overcome the rigidity by liberating the historicity and fluidity of these concepts, Kivy prefers rather to recommend something like a pluralism of positions (in the spirit, he says, of his new tolerance). You be an emotivist, I'll be a formalist; you listen this way, I'll listen that way. Here Kivy isn't always convincing, especially when he opts for this pluralism more as a gesture of tolerance or resignation than really condoning the contrary or different position. One might compare his more tolerant essay "Auditor's Emotions: Contention, Concession, Compromise" with his less tolerant "Absolute Music and the New Musicology." For Kramer, on the other hand, the retheorizing of concepts, while aimed admirably at loosening up rigid thinking, also runs the risk of reaffirming it. As I mentioned above, in critical theory one always has to be conscious of the risk that one's retheorizing will end up losing its own critical edge, such that it will end up being as ideologically rigid or dichotomous as the theory it seeks to replace.

Kivy and Kramer both give priority to the late eighteenth century, a time when music removed itself or was removed by society into an autonomous and increasingly isolated sphere of cultural practice. This was the moment, as the story goes, when the concept of a musical work fully emerged, when much more attention was paid to music's form than its content, when priority was given to purely instrumental music over music with words. At this moment, the question of how music means became urgent (cf. Kramer, p. 2). However, whereas Kramer devotes his attention to the period that came after 1800 in order partially to deconstruct that bit of the claim regarding music's autonomy that rendered music too isolated, Kivy paradoxically defends this isolation by focusing on the period prior to 1800. Kivy is and always has been committed to the eighteenth century, a commitment that inflects almost every argument he presents. That it does so, however, sometimes strains, more than it decides, the issue, for what he always seems to want to do is show that what can be said about musical practice after 1800 can also be said about it before. In Kivy's view, there are clear advantages to this strategy. First, it will yield a more or less permanent ontology for the entirety of (classical) music's history; second, it will validate philosophically the music he admires most.

The argument, however, is not that easy to make. Consider Kivy's opening essay "Note-for-Note, Performance and Early Notation," where he intends to disentangle the conceptual confusions that are associated with the claim that the work-concept realized its full character around 1800. Against the musicologist Leo Treitler, he argues that by looking carefully at the condition of repeatability in relation to the "early history" of notation (medieval), one should argue not for the absence but rather for the

presence of the work-concept. But how, Kivy wonders, should one best describe this early presence if one also wants to maintain, as he does, that something conceptually decisive happened only later in the eighteenth century? He tentatively suggests the following: let's not so much think of this early stage as having works distinct from performances but as being in a "proto-work/performance stage" (5). Proponents of the so-called "1800 thesis" might grant Kivy this suggestion if they could make sense of proto-ontology. But they might also not mind, in some sense, if they could not. For what Trietler demonstrates so well, as Kivy's own very nice remarks on repeatability do too, is that one can say much about the relation of notation to performance without invoking a work-concept at all. Think of the repeatability that occurs in ordinary language use where no such concept need be invoked. Why then add the extra proto-ontological baggage? I think the burden still remains with Kivy to show what, if anything, his weak ontological proposal adds to the historical, or even indeed to his larger ontological, account.

Both books focus on music as a mirror or model of the activities of the private and singular self. Neither pays much attention to the social practice of music-making as a communal activity, even if Kramer is concerned with the intersubjective, communicative side of the self. This focus seems appropriate for books in which the private, authorial selves are strikingly present. Kivy often speaks of how he constitutes himself as a listening self; Kramer speaks of himself also as a compositional self. Kramer offers us a CD of one of his compositions, *Revenants*, a set of 32 variations. I lack the expertise to judge the piece in compositional terms, but I was struck by the discordance of form between the piece and his postmodern essay. For although they both follow the principle of variation, the former struck my ear as having just the sort of calm, expressive and unifying voice that his postmodern essay deliberately lacks. This is intentional, Kramer suggests, insofar as his ("unoriginal") piece is meant to evoke the ghosts of a (romantic) past that, he says, postmodernist theory should not ignore. "Unoriginal music," Kramer writes to conclude his final essay, "is one resource by which . . . the living may discover their capacity to live on in the present-only differently" (287). Kivy, I think, would be suspicious of this resource: "The reason popular music is popular is that it is 'easy listening'. The reason classical music is not is that it requires, at least for its full, rich effect, knowing stuff" (215). Yet Kramer shows there's nothing (socially) easy about ease; all musics, he would likely say, are "stuffed" with meaning. Despite the difference of judgment, however, the two authors still find common ground in their shared determination to find "the good life" through their chosen musics.

*References*

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